

Bedroom farce

Brian Sparkes

In book 8 of Homer's *Odyssey*, the blind bard Demodokos entertains the members of the Phaeacian court with the story of the liaison on Olympus between Aphrodite and Ares. Ares 'brought dishonour on the bed of the lord Hephaistos' by having sex with his wife, Aphrodite. Forewarned by the Sun-god, who had seen the pair together, Hephaistos fashioned a cunning net ('as fine as spiders' webs and invisible to the blessed gods themselves') that on the next occasion fell over the bed and entrapped the pair *in flagrante*. He invited the other gods to see the guilty pair together, and 'unquenchable laughter broke out among the blessed gods as they saw the skilful devices of ingenious Hephaistos'. The embarrassed pair escaped, each to their separate hideaway, and the injured husband was offered compensation.

Ovid retold the story of Venus, Mars and Vulcan with an ironic twist or two in the second book of his *Art of Love*, and book 4 of the *Metamorphoses*. Few other classical authors, however, gave the tale extended treatment, and fewer classical artists pick up the theme. It was left to the artists of the post-antique centuries to interpret the affair in the way they chose: from medieval examples of Christian virtue to sex romps at the French court of the eighteenth century. Here are six different ways in which the association was illustrated, one from antiquity, the others from different post-antique periods (between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries).

There is no certain illustration of the episode in Greek art, but in Roman work the two 'patron deities' of the Roman state are depicted in different media that belong to private art (wall-paintings, sarcophagi, gems and silver objects). On a small silver cup (one of a pair found amongst a hoard of 118 pieces in the cellar of the House of the Menander at Pompeii and dated to around 50 B.C.), Venus and Mars are seated on a luxuriously comfortable bed in various stages of undress. Cupids are in attendance, one holding Mars' helmet, shield and sword. It is all very decorous. Only the Cupids and the armour make it possible to name the lovers, and there is no hint that this is the Homeric story. The cups were private possessions and would have been handed round at parties or displayed on tables for the delight of visitors who doubtless recalled the story to each other.

Let us turn to a mediaeval example. Christine de Pisan's book *L'Épître d'Othéa* (*Othea's Epistle*) is a guidebook on how to be a 'parfait gentil knight', full of Christian lessons of chivalry and the spiritual life, and she uses pagan myths to which she gives a modern spin. In the image here, which dates to around A.D. 1400, we see Venus and Mars lying neatly in post-coital reverie; she is awake and bright-eyed, he already asleep, as Vulcan removes a heavy chain from the bed (no spiders' webs here!). Two gods in medieval garb look on in dismay, and the orange Sun God observes the couple through the open bedroom window. The accompanying text warns the reader not against the act itself but against lying in bed until the sun is up and able to see what mischief you are about.

In the sixteenth century, artists of large-scale paintings picked up the theme. They were not illustrating a set text and so were in no way bound to adhere to the story as told by Homer and Ovid. Tintoretto, in his painting of c. A.D. 1550 seems to have gone out of his way to vary the incident. Venus lies naked across the foreground, whilst Vulcan, who has come from his forge, inspects his errant wife for signs of her adultery. She and Mars have not been caught *in flagrante*; in fact, the war god is in an absurd position under the other bed and is in serious danger of

being unmasked by the noisy little dog. Here the Venetian painter has produced a comical version – there are no gods brought on to view the scene, indeed it is not entirely clear whether Mars and Venus have yet managed to share a bed. The farce is played out in a commonplace Venetian bedroom that also houses a sleeping Cupid. At this time classical images were usually given serious attention, but Tintoretto has treated this particular theme with apparent disrespect.

In a small picture (8" x 6") painted in oil on copper, reprinted on the back cover, the colours glow and shimmer. Joachim Wtewael, a Dutch painter of the Mannerist style, has here reintroduced the deities. The couple have been caught, and at the right Vulcan, naked but for a blacksmith's apron and a saucily patterned hat, is removing the cover in which he has entrapped them. The deities are taking Homeric delight in the scene that is revealed. Mercury, next to Vulcan, wears his traveller's hat and encourages the gods to view the scandalous scene. Apollo shines light down from his brow on to the couple, as he helps a Cupid raise the surrounding curtain. A bald-headed Saturn wields his scythe and Diana, with crescent moon on the top of her head, invites us to share their joy, whilst in the background Jupiter comes roaring in with thunderbolt and eagle. Both we and the gods are voyeurs looking in on the scene. The moral is plain: be sure your sins will find you out – but the painter seems to have taken a greater interest in the embarrassed couple than in any lesson to be learnt. For centuries the painting had a hinged cover to protect it from prying eyes, so the moral seems to have missed its target.

We turn now to the image on the front cover. François Boucher's nudes are some of the best known in all art. He painted for the French court, and this particular painting was said to have been specially designed for Madame de Pompadour herself. The bed is the softest imaginable, doves bill and coo, and Cupids invite us to observe the pair by holding back the pink canopy. But Mars and another Cupid have been diverted from the frolicking and have spied the arrival of the irate husband who is even now fingering a net as delicate as gossamer (at last something 'as fine as spiders' webs'). Meanwhile a chubby Venus takes no notice, as she lies back in blissful ignorance of the exposure to come.

By the mid nineteenth century the fripperies of the French Court were long gone. The French Revolution had transformed society, and artists had chosen to paint exalted themes in a Neo-Classical style. The classical world had been falsely exalted to a plane of idealisation, and in answer to the question 'Who will deliver us from the Greeks and Romans?', Baudelaire replied 'Daumier'. He drew a series of lithographs that were published in the leading Paris satirical magazine *Le Charivari* which blew the lid off the veneration for the classical ideal. In his caricatures Daumier could not resist the story of Venus and Mars and designed two pictures of the myth. In the picture illustrated here, we are at the stage in the story when he has the pair in his heavy net. A hideous Venus in her crumpled shift hugs herself in smug satisfaction, while an upright Mars, with his Pinocchio-style nose through the net, looks very disgruntled. High on the slopes of Olympus the gods and goddesses have been summoned by Vulcan to look down on the tableau of the couple's all too obvious discomfiture.

Each generation makes what it will of the story it receives, whether in text or image. 'The smartest scandal Heaven ever

heard', as Ovid called it, has never failed to induce the unquenchable laughter that Demodokos conjured up at the Phaeacian court.

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